

number of subjects such as music programs, and cutting back on the number of teachers' aides and teachers' assistants—to know that we understand this is not a time to abandon our public schools. This is a time to invest in our future.

One final point. We have had a great deal of discussion and debate about national security and national defense. I would like to make the point that ensuring that we are going to have well-qualified children in schools that are going to meet standards is an essential aspect of our national security and national defense. And we should not shortchange that investment any more than we do our Defense Department.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Idaho.

Mr. CRAIG. Mr. President, for the last few moments I had the opportunity to listen to the Senator from Massachusetts. Of course, he is well known for his dedication to public education in this country. I applaud him for that.

I also want to recognize a President who has seen public education in its current condition to be an issue on which to speak out and on which to lead. And while the private school and the voucher may be criticized, we are creating a dynamic, now, in the marketplace of education, that means the public schools are going to have to compete a little more. In that competition, they will dramatically improve.

The condition for educating young people, in my opinion—and I think it is a growing opinion in America—will rapidly increase.

DROUGHT AND FIRE

Mr. CRAIG. Mr. President, I did not come to the floor this afternoon to speak to education. I came to the floor today to talk about what I saw on the Weather Channel this morning across the Great Basin West, the Weather Channel that spoke of a hot weather pattern that permeates the Great Basin West, that continues to allow it to be dry, and, as a result of the drought conditions, we have a unique weakness in the West this summer that tragically has been played out for a good number of years and will be played out into the future.

The western skies are full of smoke today. They are full of smoke from forest fires that started burning in mid-June on the great Rocky Mountain front of the Colorado and down into the southwestern mountains of Arizona. To date, we have seen a fire scenario on our forested public lands that is almost unprecedented in the history of the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Forest Service management.

Today, as I speak, as a result of public policy and as a result of the drought conditions in the West, we have seen over 6.3 million acres of public land burned. That 6.3 million acres is not a record, but it is without question a his-

toric record when you compare it with the averages of the kinds of public lands we have seen burned over the last good number of decades.

We watched what happened in Arizona earlier this year when nearly 700,000 acres were burned and thousands of homes were lost and lives were lost. Then, during the August recess while all of us were back in our States, we watched the firestorm that struck the eastern slopes of the Cascade Mountains in Oregon. In the State of Oregon, almost a million acres of land have burned.

In the State of California, as I speak, 3 fires are burning and over 12,000 acres have been burned.

In the State of Colorado, over a half-million acres have been burned.

That is a tragedy, without question. Wildlife habitat, watershed, has been destroyed at almost an unprecedented rate. Watershed for urban areas, habitat for endangered species—gone, up in smoke. There is nothing but a pile of ashes today because those fires were so hot, so penetrating, so intense, that they were unlike almost any other kind of fire we have seen on our public lands.

Why has that happened? What am I talking about? Is this unprecedented? Or is fire simply natural in our forest systems? Fire is a natural element in our forest systems. But what we are seeing today—because largely we took fire out of the ecosystems of our forests 70 years ago—is that these are very much abnormal fires, burning hotter than ever, burning entire stands, burning the ground to such an extent that we are caramelizing the soil and burning the humus out of it. By so doing, we are disallowing the ability of those forests to rejuvenate as they would under a reasonably normal scenario.

Why is this happening? It is happening because of public policy, because of an attitude that was held right here in this Senate that has crafted public policy over the last several decades that not only took fire out of the forests but didn't allow active management in the forest to replace what fire would have otherwise accomplished.

As you know, in the Black Hills of South Dakota you have had this kind of situation. In fact, the Presiding Officer and his colleague, Senator DASCHLE, have felt the situation so intense and so risky of ecosystems, of timber, of wildlife habitat, of human dwellings and all of that, that you chose to act. I think you acted in a relatively appropriate way to recognize the need for immediate action that would not deny the thinning and the cleaning and the fuel reduction that needed to go on in those forests.

I chaired the forest subcommittee for 5 or 6 years here in the Senate. We have spent a lot of time looking at this issue, trying to deal with this issue—largely to no avail.

In the early 1980s, a group of forest scientists met in Sun Valley, ID, for a

national review of the health of our forested lands. At that time, 1981 or 1982, I believe, those forest scientists, with no bias, simply made the statement that the public forests of the Great Basin West were sick, dead, and dying, and if there was not active management involved to change the character of the forest health, that within a decade or so these forests could be swept by devastating wildfires.

Those scientists were not prophets. They didn't have a crystal ball. They simply looked at the facts that were available in the early 1980s and made a determination that, without active management, we could lose these forests in an unprecedented way.

During the decade of the 1980s that followed and the decade of the 1990s, we did just exactly the opposite of what those forest scientists proposed. We progressively became inactive on our forests, largely because many thought, and public policy allowed the argument, that no management and no activity would improve the environment. What we failed to recognize was that the environment had deteriorated so that simply could not be the case and that these kinds of fires would be stand altering, stand destructive, and destroying wildlife habitat and watersheds that we see in the West today.

The fire seasons in the West are not over. Today, literally thousands of acres are still burning. My guess is that before the fire season is over, we will see over 7 million acres of land burned.

Before we left for the August recess, a group of us gathered at a press conference to speak in a bipartisan way to this issue. At that time, we had not yet quite determined what we needed to do, but we believed the American public was becoming increasingly aware that something had to be done, that we needed to lean on this issue to save our forests, to save wildlife habitat, to have a watershed, and to protect homes in that urban wildland interface.

I said at that press conference—the last of July or early August, and at that time—that less than 4 million acres had burned. I said that probably by the time we returned over 67 million acres would have burned. I was no prophet. I simply had studied fires and the way they were burning in the West over the last several years to recognize that was probably a reality. And it became a reality practically enough. Today, 6.3 million acres have burned. Thousands of acres are currently burning, with fires in almost all of the Western States—at this moment actively burning and out of control.

We said at that press conference that when we returned, we would try to resolve a bipartisan approach we could bring to the floor so that we might offer it as an amendment to the Interior appropriations bill or some similar vehicle. We are in the final hours of trying to craft that kind of an amendment that would bring us together in a bipartisan way, and in a collaborative way, to solve this problem.

Earlier this year, the Western Governors Association, in conjunction with the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture, met and produced a western fire policy that dealt with these fire-prone acres. They proposed a collaborative process that targeted those critical areas in all of the States involved and that would allow us to move forward in a relatively unrestricted but environmentally sound way to do so. There has been a lot of work going on to try to solve this problem.

Late this month, the President was out in Oregon, looked at those fire scenarios, and reported that he, too, agreed that active management was necessary, that our forests were at a critical state, that we were in a state of emergency, and that failure to respond was negligence on our part. The President also said we shouldn't block from the courthouse doors people who would want to appeal or object.

While I agree with you, Mr. President, and TOM DASCHLE, your colleague, chose a slightly different course that would have denied appeals and court actions under certain circumstances, we are working right now to try to see if we can craft that collaborative process that would limit but still allow some degree of protest and/or objection, or appeal based on law and based on the reality of the environment, and at the same time not allow those thousands who would choose to obstruct entirely—to simply use that as a tool to bring any action on our public land.

I hope by tomorrow we can bring to the floor that kind of an amendment which will have bipartisan support. We are going to try mightily to achieve that.

Let me close with this thought, because to me this is the most frightening of the thoughts about which I have talked.

Six point three million acres have burned to date, 2,500 homes have been wiped out, and 25 people have died trying to fight those fires. If this had been Hurricane Andrew, which devastated less, we, with the full force of the Government, would be out there today helping those people rebuild those homes and trying to solve the problem. But some have said: Oh, no, this is just Mother Nature, and this is natural. Well, hurricanes are Mother Nature, and they are very natural. But still we have reacted differently. A hurricane is going on in the forests of public lands—wiping out millions of acres of trees, 2,500 homes, killing 25 people to date, and it is clearly something we have to speak to, and speak loudly.

Even if we are able to gain public support to get optimum public activity on our public land, if we are able to thin and clean and fireproof tens of millions of acres a year—even if we do that—our scientists are telling us that the forested lands—the Great Basin West primarily, but all of the public forests of our country—today are in

such unhealthy condition that over the next 15 years we could still average anywhere from 5 million to 8 million acres a year being wiped out by wildfire, depending on climate conditions—drought or lack of moisture.

Shame on us for having waited so long to attempt to do so little. But we must attempt now to do something. I hope we can bring all of the communities of interest together in a kind of collaborative process to look at these acres, to deal with what we call the class 3 sick, dead, and/or dying bug-infested acres, to look at our urban wildland interface, to talk about and help shape the environment that protects homes while at the same time protecting wildlife habitat and watershed and what can once again be the beautiful forests of this country.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Maine is recognized.

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be permitted to proceed as if in morning business for up to 12 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Ms. COLLINS. Thank you, Mr. President.

CONSERVATION FUNDING IN THE INTERIOR BILL

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, today the Senate begins consideration of the fiscal year 2003 Interior appropriations bill. Land conservation funding is the critical component of this legislation—funding for land conservation preserves, wetlands, open fields, barrens, and woodlands that are threatened by ever-increasing pressures from development.

I would like to highlight three land conservation projects funded in this bill that are of particular significance to the State of Maine.

First, let me congratulate the distinguished chairman and ranking member of the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, Senators BYRD and BURNS, for producing a bill that includes a generous amount for land conservation effort in the face of severe fiscal constraints.

The Forest Legacy Program, in particular, is funded at \$80 million in this bill, which represents a nearly 25-percent increase from last year's level. This is a remarkable achievement considering that when I first joined the Senate in 1997, the Forest Legacy Program was funded at only \$2 million.

I am a very strong supporter of the Forest Legacy Program because it recognizes that our forests are both the source of good jobs and of boundless recreational opportunities for our sportsmen, our hunters, our hikers, and everyone who enjoys the great outdoors.

I am very pleased, therefore, that the bill before us today includes \$2.9 million in Forest Legacy funding for an important project in Maine. It is

known as the West Branch Project. The funding that is in this legislation will help us complete this important land conservation effort. This historic project has been more than 3 years in the making, and it is a testament to what can be accomplished when the Federal Government teams up with private landowners, private nonprofit groups, and State and local governments to preserve special lands. I have worked hard with my senior colleague from Maine to help this project reach fruition.

This significant project will protect 330,000 acres of lakefront and forest lands in some of the most pristine areas of the State of Maine. Much of the West Branch lands make up the viewshed from Mt. Katahdin, Maine's largest peak and the northernmost point of the Appalachian Trail. Their protection through the Forest Legacy Program is critical for the well-being of Maine's recreational and natural resources. Moreover, protection of this land through the Forest Legacy Program will enable the landowners to continue to supply area mills and support the local economy while allowing the public continued access to the beautiful lakes, streams, and back country wildlands that are characteristic of this area.

That is why the Forest Legacy Program is such a good one. It recognizes that our forests have multiple purposes, that they can provide good jobs for those in the forest products industry as well as being a source of beautiful recreational opportunities for all of us who enjoy walking through the woods or fishing or hunting or enjoying the lakes and streams that abound in those forests.

Regrettably, the House Interior appropriations bill does not contain any funding for completing the West Branch Project; therefore, I hope the Senate position will prevail in conference.

Another land conservation project that is important to my State is the protection of the 8,600-acre Leavitt Plantation Forest. I, again, thank the managers of this bill for including \$600,000 for this project in their legislation.

Leavitt is the largest contiguous forest in southern Maine. The forest was targeted for development 2 years ago, when it was scheduled for auction in as many as 13 separate parcels.

Fortunately, Renewable Resources, a timber management company, approached the Maine Department of Conservation and the Nature Conservancy with a plan to protect Leavitt Plantation. Working together with the owner of the property, the company agreed to purchase the tract up to the New Hampshire border and to sell a conservation easement that will protect wildlife habitat, while allowing the property to continue to be managed for forestry and recreation.

Finally, the bill includes \$3 million to purchase critical shorebird nesting